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## France

## Biotechnology

## More Pro-Biotech Voices in France

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### Report Highlights:

**Biotechnology has recently been part of headlines in the French media. As a start, the group of respected French scientists/academicians presented three reports which were requested by the French Government. These reports recommended the lifting of the EU moratorium on new biotech approvals. The reports were in favor of the development of agricultural and pharmaceutical biotechnology in France because French scientists and academicians believe that biotech benefits outweigh the risk. But, the French Food Safety Agency (AFSSA), which is responsible for food safety, has yet to render its views of biotech products. However, it is worth noting that the French industry representatives and consumers reacted positively to the recent decision by the EU Agricultural and Environmental Councils on biotech labeling and traceability.**

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Includes PSD changes: No  
Includes Trade Matrix: No  
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## 1. Three New Reports Provided to the GOF Favoring Development of Biotechnology

### *a. Noëlle Lenoir's Report: Recommendations to the GOF to put France Back into Competition in Biotechnology*

On November 30, a final report entitled “Meeting the Challenge of Biotechnology” prepared by Noëlle Lenoir, currently Minister for European Affairs, was presented to the Minister of Economy, Finance and Industry. The initial version had been provided to the previous government (which was voted out the office in June 2002). The new government had asked for additional information on biotechnology.

This report describes how far behind France is in biotechnology and related initiatives. Noëlle Lenoir's report clearly points out that, compared to the UK and Germany, not to mention the United States, France is not attractive to researchers and contractors in the field of biotechnology. The report shows France to have insufficient investments in biotech research in both public and private sectors. The report recommended that the French government should invest more in biotechnology to keep pace with other countries.

### *b. French Academies of Medicine, Pharmacy and Sciences Reports: Biotech Food and Pharmaceutical Products Present no Particular Risks*

On December 12 and 13, the French Academy of Medicine and Pharmacy, and the French Academy of Sciences, respectively, presented to the GOF their reports on biotechnology. They concur to the conclusion that “transgenic crops can be introduced reasonably, cautiously, and case by case in agriculture.”

The reports conclude that expected benefits of biotechnology outweigh its potential risks. The benefits of agri-biotechnology listed in the reports include: reduction in pesticide and insecticide use; changing food content to fight against lack of iron or vitamins, deficiency of proteins, and/or unbalanced diet (in fatty acids for example). In the pharmaceutical sector, the reports list a number of benefits including the possibility to create numerous molecules (such as hormones, interferon, antibodies, and vaccines) that are impossible or very difficult to obtain through existing methods.

Another recommendation of the reports is that the French biotech regulation on research and use of biotech products need to be changed because they put France in an inferior position relative to other industrialized countries. The Academy of Sciences wonders whether France, as a nation, could afford to put and/or impose on itself an “extreme interpretation” of the precautionary principle. Accordingly, they believe that such an interpretation would slow down the country's biotechnology development, while other countries continue to expand their investment and knowledge base.

Other recommendations include the following:

- a “cautious and reasonable” introduction of biotech crops in agriculture, on a case by case basis;
- a support of basic research;
- an increase in pupils’ knowledge of biology;
- an incentive for researchers to communicate more their knowledge to the public;
- public authorities to take firm positions, especially on the threshold of adventitious presence of biotech products.

*c. French Minister of Research Stands for Developing Biotech Open Field Test Plots*

On December 14, in an interview published in the daily newspaper “Le Monde,” French Minister of Research and New Technologies stated that France was “decidedly willing to adopt regulations to lift the moratorium.” She made positive comments on the EU Minister Council’s recently proposed regulation on biotech labeling and traceability, saying that, when this legislation is adopted, “citizens will be offered a real choice thanks to a clear labeling and monitored traceability, and their own decision will be the deciding factor for the future of the biotech sector.”

In addition, the Minister publicly stated that she was in favor of expanding research and open field testing of biotech crops. She considered the current number of biotech test plots (approximately 40) in France to be insignificant compared to what it was prior to the 1999 EU moratorium (over a thousand). She qualified the current frozen situation in France of “self-censorship,” resulting from the moratorium and the biotech test plot destructions. She stood for France to get out of this “extreme situation” and to allow research, while respecting the regulations and scientific work to continue.

## **2. French Industry Reactions to the EU Minister Councils’ Proposed Regulation on Traceability and Labeling of Biotech Products**

In France, the recent EU decision of Agricultural and Environmental Minister Councils reached respectively on November 28 and December 9 on biotech labeling and traceability were overwhelmingly welcomed by representatives of the food, feed and seed industries, distributors and consumers. But, some industry representatives were disappointed in that EU ministers reached a compromise on a threshold as low as 0.9 percent above which products would have to be labeled as containing biotech products. They wanted a higher threshold (above 1.0 percent).

The Association of French Food Companies (ANIA) was also disappointed in that the EU Councils’ agreements set similar labeling regulations for raw biotech products (such as corn kernels) that contain transformed DNA and proteins, and for purified molecules (such as oils) processed from biotech crops, which contain no trace of genetic modification. ANIA argues that this would make the regulation very difficult to implement by the food industry and regulatory authorities inspecting products imported into the EU.

Moreover, the European Federation of Animal Feed Compounders (FEFAC), whose President is French, considers that the threshold (of 0.9 percent) adopted will allow the feed industry to relatively satisfy their customers' demand. In short, FEFAC welcomed the agreements reached in Brussels because they had asked for a regulation for a long time.

The French Association of Seed Industries (GNIS) commented that the 0.9 percent threshold will be difficult to implement once biotech crops are grown in the EU, because of higher probability of cross-pollination between biotech crops and non-biotech crops.

The Commerce and Trade Federation (FCD), which includes the major French supermarket chains, commented that they were "OK" with the EU Councils' proposed regulation. They were especially happy to have a text of proposed regulations on the adventitious presence of biotech products.

Now, everyone is waiting for the views of the French Food Safety Agency (AFSSA). Stay tuned!